

THE BEGINNING OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY IN RELATION TO THEORY AND PRACTICE
THE ACCADEMIA DELLA VIRTÙ, ROMAN ARCHAEOLOGY AND SOME (POSSIBLY PALLADIAN) CONSEQUENCES

Abstract

“... *in the beginning was Palladio.*” This paper will suggest that this claim from the *Call for Papers* is true – if at all – only with some very strong limitations: While Palladio certainly was the first to *publish* a rather systematic collection of Roman antiquities in his *Libro Quattro*, the question remains, if this was his own idea or – if not – where he might have taken his inspiration from. The hypothesis to be presented at the conference is, that Palladio with his publication of the *Quattro libri* only fulfils (and in parts: extends) parts of the program of the *Accademia della Virtù*, transmitted in the famous letter by Claudio Tolomei from 1542, published in 1547.

“... *his [Palladio’s] was the first systematic publication of architectural works themselves.*” Of course, Palladio’s surveys are not only more comprehensive or more systematic than publications of his contemporaries and precursors like Serlio or Labacco, but the idea to collect and present all important Roman buildings in a survey with exact measurements and historical and architectural commentaries stems from Tolomei’s letter (if not from Raphael’s ‘letter’ – never sent – to Leo X). That Palladio knew about this project and even took part in its realisation can be derived from very few surviving sources and his travel(s) to Rome in the 1540s as a companion to his mentor Trissino who took part in the *Accademia*’s meetings.

But is this historical footnote of any importance for architectural history? First of all, it can help to overcome a ‘historiography of heroes’ that should have been abandoned long ago. In addition, the intrinsically interdisciplinary project of the *Accademia* deserves more attention – especially, when it should be true that it did not only remain a concept but created the biggest amount of Renaissance drawings and manuscript sources documenting Antiquity, which largely has been ignored and not seen as a *corpus* until recently.

Furthermore, the project was not only intended to understand Vitruvius but to deliver the most comprehensive documentation of antique architecture and its theory based on *all available sources!* And its purpose was not ‘purely scientific’ but to establish *the* guideline for a most perfect modern architecture. This should sound familiar to any reader of Palladio’s *Quattro libri*. To modern scholars it could serve as a methodological example how architectural theory, history and practice could be joined for a very contemporary purpose.

The vast amount of material connectable to the *Accademia*’s project and documenting (not only) antique architecture in its (much more complete) state of the 1540s should be recognised by architectural historians and archaeologist as well as historians of science and engineering. Because these sources are now spread all over the (western) world, the paper will present in short a suggestion for a form of publication that also could serve as a model for similar and other cases where large amounts of historical documents (not only from the history of architecture) should be made available for the scientific community as working material with digital tools.

1. What I want to present today to you is a side aspect of my currently ongoing research regarding a very large – I would even say: the largest – known group of Renaissance drawings containing incredibly precise measurements of ancient architecture from Rome and some other places.
2. The project is funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, situated at my working place, the Werner Oechslin Library at Einsiedeln,
3. and was initiated with the irreplaceable help of Andreas Tönnemann who unfortunately died in May last year far too early...
4. The anonymous drawings by mostly French draftsmen are now distributed all over the (western world): the biggest and central part is the so-called Codex Destailleur D at the Kunstbibliothek Berlin. A second large group complementing it can be found at the Albertina, Vienna, and other drawings that I think belong to the group can be found in New York, London, Paris, Stockholm, Vicenza and maybe some other places, too. My list contains now almost 500 sheets with close to 3'000 singular drawings.
From this amount alone it is plausible that these drawings can not have been made by a few French carpenters and stone masons at the *Fabbrica di San Pietro* in Rome, one of whom, a certain “Gulielmo francioso”, I could identify as the “Anonymous Destailleur” – as Hermann Egger called him in 1903 in his catalogue of drawings after the Antique at the Albertina.
5. But it is not only the sheer amount of drawings that make it plausible to suppose a person or rather a group of persons behind this project to measure obviously *all ancient buildings* surviving from Antiquity in – and some outside of – Rome. Also, the incredible precision of the measurements and completeness of the representations, showing many parts that all other architects and draftsmen from the Renaissance usually ignored in their surveys of ancient buildings, makes it clear – at least to me – that there must have been some “mastermind” behind the group, and also some “leading” architect with some considerable architectural knowledge and ability to draw. (Sorry, but this person is not Palladio.)
One of many characteristics of these drawings leading to this conclusion are inscriptions like these two addressing a French speaking person asking for additional work and – the other one – informing an Italian speaking reader in very bad Italian that the Dorica from the Theatre of Marcellus does *really* have no basis – a fact, that could have been known to learned architects since the publication of Serlio’s *Libro terzo* a few years before this drawing was made.
6. I just want to show you two examples for the precision of the measurements: This ground plan of the Colosseum is not only measured in its entirety down to parts of a millimeter, but also the distances between the arcade pillars are measured twice: Also, several starting points of straight views through the building and of distances from the main axis are documented:
7. It seems to me that this had been done because the draftsmen – or rather: their ‘mastermind’ – knew or realised – correctly – that the Colosseum’s plan is not an exact geometrical oval or ellipse. So, different from all other measurements of the Colosseum (at least: that I know of), the building is not supposed here to have a geometrical correct plan that easily could be reconstructed at the drawing table at home, but instead of such a supposition many points and distances are documented to reconstruct from them finally the correct form – an approach that I would call a rather “philological” one.
8. Another example for the precision is this drawing from a series showing the Pantheon now in New York: Here, the inclination of the letters in the main ancient inscription is documented. Because of a “restauration” in the 19th century, this feature is now lost – and only documented in this drawing. I could go on in the same way for a few hours, showing you drawings documenting lost parts and buildings or documenting

them in an – up to day – unrivalled precision. Nethertheless, these drawings have largely been ignored by architectural historians, archaeologist or historians of science.

So: Who, then, was responsible for this project? Who may have been the 'mastermind' – or rather: the masterminds, speaking Italian and French? Who the architect supervising the measurement process? And who may have taken part in the surveys? Among the last I suppose to be Palladio, among the first: his mentor Giangiorgio Trissino:

9. While in Rome since 1541, Trissino – accompanied by the young Palladio – was participating at least in some of the meetings of the so-called *Accademia della Virtù*. That is exactly the time when most of these drawings were made. The *Accademia* planned to publish a list of 24 books on ancient architecture, among them a list of editions, translations and vocabularies regarding Vitruvius – while other volumes were intended to document *all material remains* from Roman Antiquity – not only architecture but also inscriptions, tomb stones and reliefs, coins, medals, vases, machines and so on . . .
10. The drawings I am working on I regard as preparations for the books number 13, 14 and – presumably – 18 on this list.
11. The list was published by the Siennese humanist Claudio Tolomei among his own letters in 1547,
12. but written 5 years ago, in 1542, to count Agostino de' Landi. Usually, you will find in modern literature, that this was a *research* program by the *Accademia* but never realised –
13. except for one book, Guillaume Philandrier's *Annotationes* to the *Ten Books on Architecture* by Vitruvius from 1544.
14. Also, you may read, that the program contains 20 (or, as in a recent dissertation: even only 8) items or topics. And almost all modern literature just mentions the editorial plans for Vitruvius' *Ten Books* but not the rest – which, in fact, would have required even more work. Nothing of this is true. (Therefore, unfortunately, this may indicate, that many architectural historians can not read, count or just copy claims from their colleagues without reading the original sources . . .)
15. First of all, Tolomei clearly mentions 24 or – depending how you count: – at least 23 books.
16. Then, he clearly states that this is not a research project 'for eternity', but a publishing program for books and that all the books would be published within only THREE years – provided that sufficient funding would be available.
Finally, the *Accademia della Virtù* is not mentioned at all in the letter – only a large group of "*tanti dotti huomini*". Nor is the *Accademia dello Sdegno* or – as you can often read: the *Accademia Vitruviana*.
17. In fact, the *Accademias della Virtù* and *dello Sdegno*, i.e. "Academy of Outrage" – outrage regarding the destruction of ancient Roman monuments for spoliation contained many people connected to one or both of the *Accademias* – while an "*Accademia Vitruviana*" is clearly just an invention of modern scholars, and – you may already guess with regard to the list – a wrong, at least: shortcoming one.
18. There are some letters reporting of gatherings in the houses of Tolomei and others, mostly – but not only – discussing topics regarding Vitruvius. But we also have the note from Vasari, confirmed by Egnazio Danti, that the young Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola *measured all the antiquities of Rome in the service of Accademia*.
19. So, here is an overview of half of the people mentioned somewhere in letters and other sources with regard to the *Accademia della Virtù* and their relationships. The *Accademia* started around 1537 as a society to

study Latin poetry and – mainly – to advance the development of a modern Italian which could substitute Latin as the language used for literature and scientific purposes. [Trissino and Tolomei were strongly engaged in this discussion, for instance.] It's activity seems to have ended around 1555, supposedly because of the early death of one of its most influential supporters: Cardinal Marcello Cervini, for 3 weeks in 1555 Pope Marcellus II.

20. Besides my research regarding the drawings, I try to reconstruct not only the network of persons but also the printed or unpublished works that may or certainly do have their roots in preparations for the publishing program. You may see some common names like Vignola, Barbaro or Strada – and some rather uncommon ones like Jean Matal (who recently became one of my “heroes” in regard to research on Antiquity in the Renaissance based on a very systematic and – I would say: – scientific approach and methodology.
21. Before I, finally, come to Palladio, I would like to point your attention to one other aspect of the program: As I mentioned before, the entire program was *not* developed to just bring out a new edition and translation of Vitruvius, but, instead, to use Vitruvius and *all other remaining* sources from Roman Antiquity to create a foundation for a modern architecture that would be based on the best examples from ancient Rome and enriched with the best modern examples and, by doing so, establishing some *set of rules* or a *guidebook* for any modern architect and house-builder, too.
22. So, how does Palladio fit into this picture? First of all, please note the crowning figure of the frontispieces to all of his fourth books: Isn't it astonishing, that this is the *Regina Virtus* and not some personification of Architecture, the Arts, Geometry or something alike?
23. Then, let's have a look at the examples from Palladio's fourth book that stood behind the opening claim of the Call for Papers to this conference: “*In the beginning was Vasari and in the beginning was Palladio*”: All of Palladio's illustrated architectural descriptions of ancient buildings (and Bramante's *Tempietto* as the only modern one) begin with a short introduction to the function, location and meaning of the building. What we might miss – with a look at the *Accademia's* project – is a description of the historical setup or backgrounds of these buildings and a try to situate them in some sort of historical development of Rome and / or of Roman architecture.
24. My guess, why these elements are missing is that Palladio in the late 1560 was more interested here in the pure architectural aspects – after all, this is a book on *architecture* not on *Roman architectural history* – though historical aspects are mentioned every now and then. But in addition, a book describing the urban setting and development of Rome had already been published 26 and 36 years ago. So, for Palladio there was simply no need to repeat Marliano's *Topographia* in his *Four books*.
In addition, we know that Palladio planned at least two other books on ancient buildings: One on triumphal arches and one on the imperial baths. Both would have required, I would say, an embedment of these buildings into their urban context regarding, for instance, the streets leading to them or the water supply through aqueducts still visible in Rome and its surrounding *campagna*. So, I would guess that his other, unfinished books would have contained more historical information – and therefore, Palladio reduced this aspect in the *Four Books*.
25. But was Palladio even involved in the *Accademia's* activities, especially in the measuring of the ancient Roman buildings? – I would say: yes.
First of all: The aforementioned Jean Matal notes some time before 1555 that he received an ancient inscription from a tomb stone near Vicenza from Palladio.
Secondly: The only time that Palladio stood in Rome long enough to do any measuring himself – as he mentions from time to time in his books –, were the almost three years following 1541 when he visited

Rome with Trissino. All later stays did not last longer than a few weeks each.

Could he have done all these measurements alone? – Surely not: Even an triumphal arch or a small temple require 2-3 helping assistants to measure them – even today when you may use a 3D laser scanner.

Would he have been able to organize his own measuring campaign while in Rome? – Surely not: Even at the age of 33 when he came to Rome, he was a rather young stone-mason just becoming an architect and may neither have had the financial nor the methodological resources to start such a project himself.

In addition, we know that Trissino was part of the *Accademia* – and, therefore, we may suppose that Palladio took part in the measurings done for them under the guidance – at least in the first years – of Vignola.

But: Do we have any sources supporting this hypotheses? – I think so:

There are only very few early drawings by Palladio left that can be dated to the 1540s and show measurements of Roman antiquities. The usual guess is, that Palladio destroyed the original drawings when he (or his workshop) made clean, perfect drawings after them. One example is shown here: On the left, an elevation of the *Porta Maggiore* is shown; on the right, parts of the substructions from the podium of the Tempel of Claudius appear on the Verso.

26. The same combination appears on a sheet from the Berlin Codex Destailleur D, but in drawings clearly made “in the field” and presumably refined later: Again, we see the *Porta Maggiore* – or rather: 80% of it – on one side of the sheet and the Claudianum’s substructions on its back. Still, of course, this may be a coincidence, because both buildings are located in the same part of Rome.
27. Another sheet with such an “coincidence” is this one by Palladio: Here we see a rather schematic ground plan of the Basilica of Maxentius (or Constantine):
28. It is the first one shown by Palladio in his *Fourth Book* – but by him (and many others up to the 19th century) regarded as the *Templum Pacis*, the temple of Peace, which, in fact, was nearby.
29. Beside the plan of the Basilica (and other, smaller drawings), a spiral appears on Palladio’s sheet, supposedly showing an attempt to reconstruct the construction of the volute of an ionic capital.
30. Again, the same pairing appears on this sheet from the Codex Destailleur D at Berlin – together with the later drawn Dorica of Antonio da Sangallo’s last project for Saint Peter’s in Rome, the topic of my dissertation.
31. If we now put the two spirals on top of each other, we can see that they are almost perfectly identical – which can be due to a common model. But the appearance of these two congruences alone seems to me as a possible support for the argument, that the young Palladio was, in fact, somehow involved in the *Accademia*’s activities in Rome.
Therefore, I would say, we may assume that his first printed steps into a historiography of architecture are based on his experiences from this circle.
32. Finally, it should be mentioned, that Palladio’s cooperation with Barbaro: He provided most if not all the illustrations for Barbaro’s commented Italian and Latin editions of Vitruvius and, based on his own experiences, explicitly helped the learned Patriarch of Aquilea to understand architectural problems. This cooperation may have been started not by Palladio himself but via his mentor Trissino who also stood in contact with Barbaro. I think it is also possible, that the idea to the Barbaro’s commented editions of Vitruvius may have been taken from the *Accademia*’s program when, in 1555 or before, it must have been clear that at least these parts of the programm will not be published anymore. And because they also contain almost all illustrations Vitruvius mentions but which have been lost since Antiquity (and many

more), we may – hypothetically – see in these two editions some late results of the *Accademia*'s publishing project and the research done for it.

Therefore, I hope you may agree, it seems worth to further study not only Palladio's drawings with regard to his studies in Rome, but also the many others sources like the Codex Destailleur D and its group of drawings that presumably have been created for and by the *Accademia*.

33. After all, while we may regard Vignola's *Regola delli cinque ordini* from before 1562 as the most influential "theoretical" book in architectural history, reprinted some 500 times since then, Palladio's *Quattro Libri*, and even more: his built architecture may be seen as the most influential "practical" contribution to architecture, leaving traces everywhere where any "classical" influence is visible ... And both of them may have their roots in the forgotten project – and work! – of the *Accademia*.

So, I guess you may agree: even though one may think that almost everything has been said about ancient Roman architecture and its Renaissance – and the beginnings of an historical understanding of architecture and, therefore, architectural historiography ... that we still may expect a lot of ...

34. "News from Ancient Rome".

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